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Scotland's Conservation Landowners

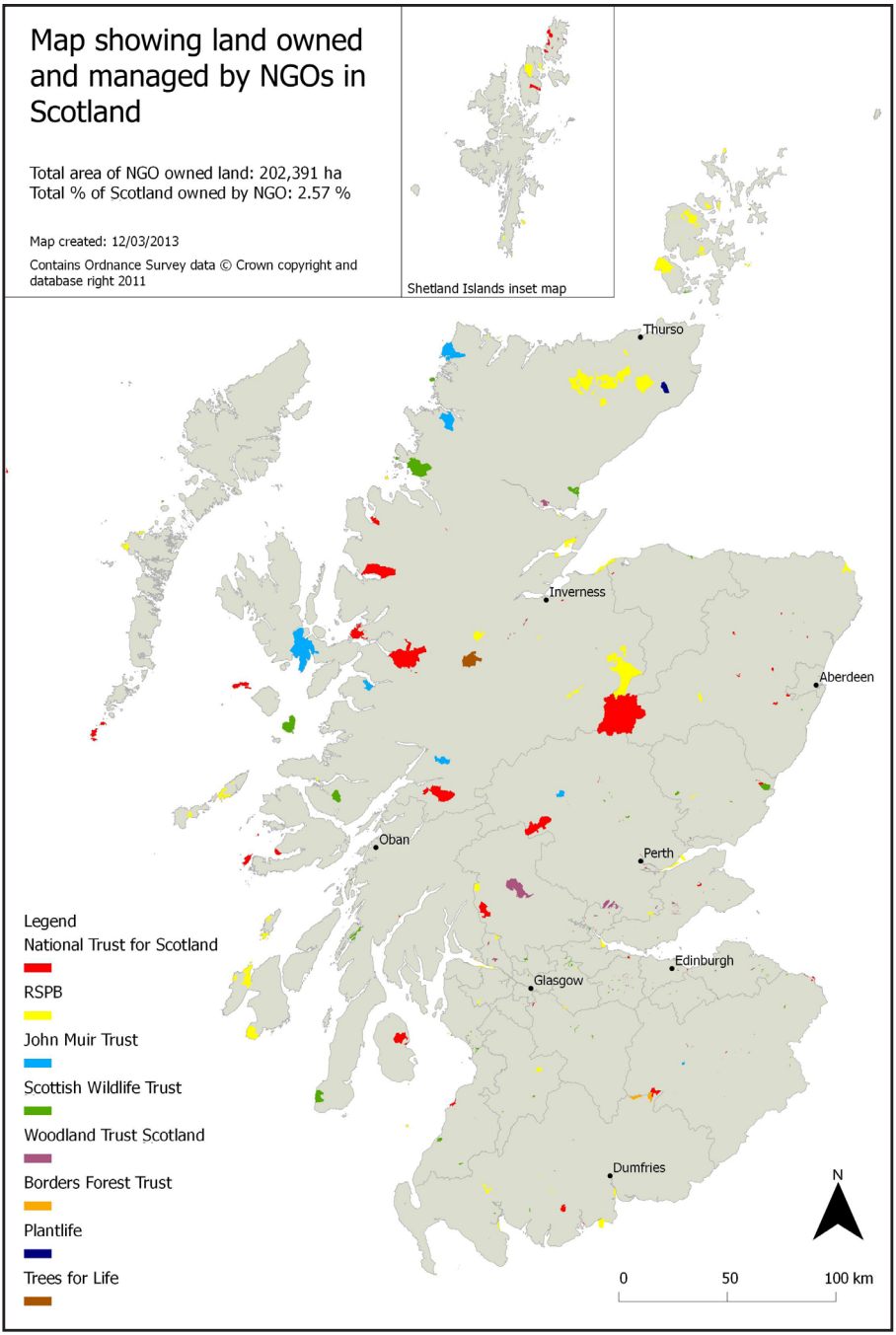
Jayne Glass and Rob McMorran

Since the 1980s, there has been a reinvigorated movement by conservation organisations to purchase land in remote and scenic parts of Scotland. This has happened for a number of reasons, including a perceived failure of government conservation policies and designations to protect the natural heritage, and a growth in public environmental awareness. Buying land has also taken place as a way to demonstrate conservation land management in practice, alongside lobbying and campaigning activities, as well as to respond to threats from development. For example, moves by the Ministry of Defence in 1983 to buy Knoydart for use as a bombing range led to the foundation of the John Muir Trust, which campaigned to save the area from military use, subsequently buying Li and Coire Dhorrcail on the Knoydart peninsula.

Current debates surrounding land reform in Scotland raise many questions about how land should be owned and managed. Should there be a cap on the upper limit of the size of landholdings? Who should be allowed to buy land in Scotland? Are privately-owned or community-owned estates likely to deliver more public benefits? Not as much discussed is the 'middle ground' of conservation ownership, where land is owned by well-known environmental organisations. What do we know about this type of land ownership and management model, and what benefits are associated with it?

Who are Scotland's conservation landowners?

Scottish land under conservation ownership includes islands, iconic and remote mountain landscapes, heavily designated nature reserves, and some of the largest and most valuable areas of semi-natural habitats (e.g. Caledonian pinewoods). As a group, charitable conservation organisations own a relatively small proportion of Scotland – just 2.6% (approximately 207,000 hectares). The National Trust for Scotland (NTS) is actually Scotland's third largest landowner, owning over 77,000 hectares across 128 sites (just over 1% of the country). The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) owns and / or manages over 71,000 hectares, and the John Muir Trust (JMT) just under 25,000 hectares. Other organisations that own land include the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT), Woodland Trust Scotland (WTS), Borders Forest Trust (BFT), Plantlife and Trees for Life (TFL). Land owned by these organisations extends across the whole country, from larger areas in the Cairngorms, to the Flow Country and West Highlands. Sites under conservation ownership include some of the most well-known and heavily visited places, including iconic mountain areas such as Glencoe and Dalness, West Affric, Torridon and Ben Lawers (all owned by NTS), and Ben Nevis and Schiehallion (JMT).


Map showing land owned and managed by NGOs in Scotland
Total area of NGO owned land: 202,391 ha
Total % of Scotland owned by NGO: 2.57 %
Map created: 12/03/2013
Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2011
Shetland Islands inset map
Thurso
Inverness
Aberdeen
Oban
Perth
Edinburgh
Glasgow
Dumfries
Legend
National Trust for Scotland
RSPB
John Muir Trust
Scottish Wildlife Trust
Woodland Trust Scotland
Borders Forest Trust
Plantlife
Trees for Life
N
0
50
100 km

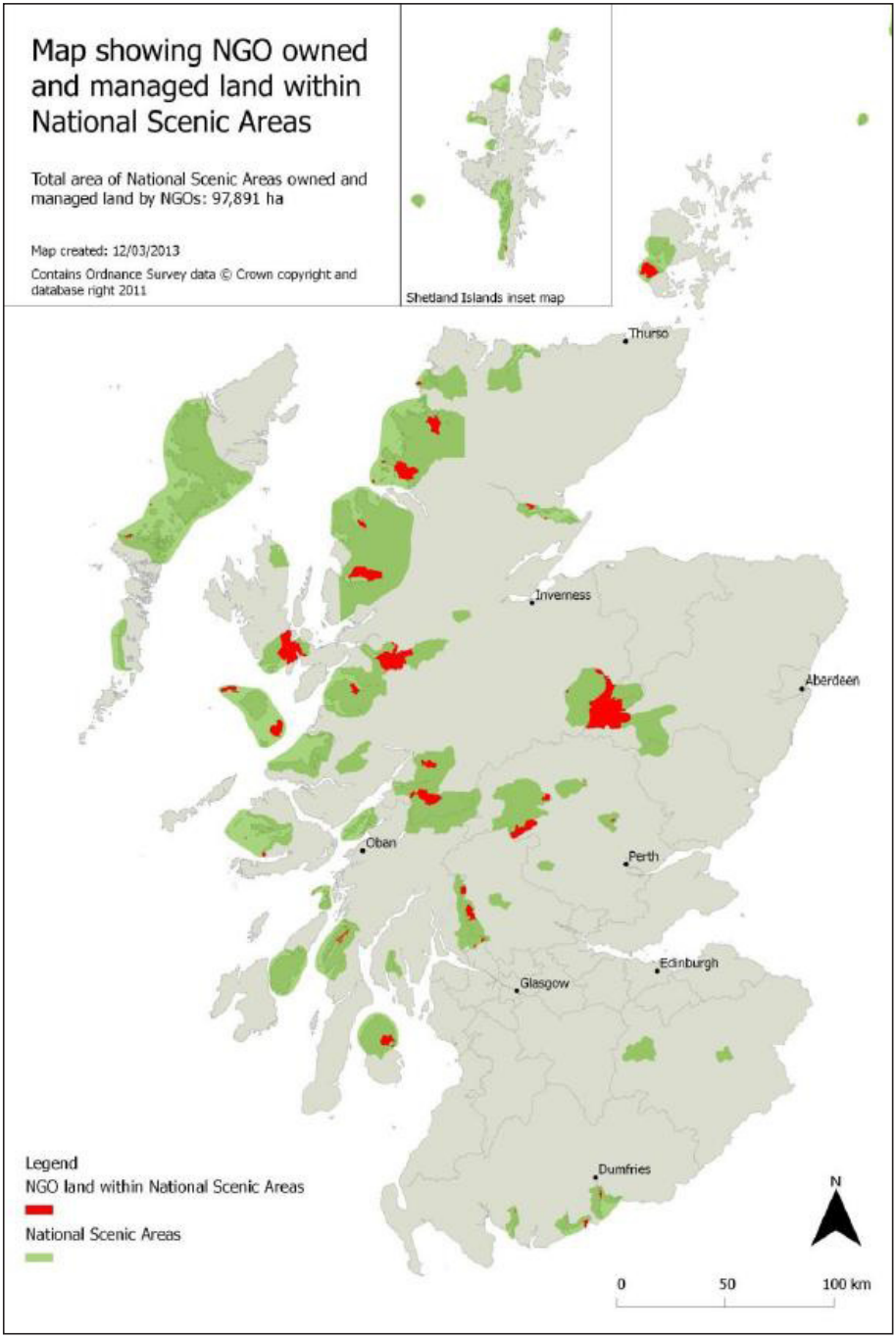
Conservation organisations have common aims: conserving species and habitats, providing access and recreational opportunities, and interpreting the natural heritage to educate the public about the importance of protecting the environment. Giving land 'security' of tenure, continuity of management and a high standard of care is also important. Owning land to achieve these aims normally happens as a result of either a direct purchase, a gift (Woodland Trust Scotland receives many offers of woodland sites, for example), or legacies. Land has also been bought in partnership with communities. For example, JMT works in partnership with four community landholdings in the Highlands: Assynt, Galson, Knoydart and North Harris, having contributed to the purchase of three of these sites. Similarly, SWT provided funding (together with the Highland Council) for the community buyout of the Isle of Eigg and remains on the board as member and advisor.

There has been a general trend of fewer acquisitions in recent years due to the considerable and increasing expense of buying and managing land. It is becoming preferable to extend existing sites (either through ownership or by influencing the management of neighbours' land) rather than buying new ones. This recognises that 'bigger is better' for landscape conservation and large-scale restoration of ecosystems, along with combatting habitat fragmentation (allowing important species and habitats to extend in networks, rather than in isolation).

Owning and restoring Scotland's protected land

Despite owning only a small proportion of Scotland, conservation organisations own a disproportionately large amount of land that has some form of natural heritage designation. For example, 31.5% of all land in Scotland designated as National Nature Reserve is owned or managed by conservation organisations, as is nearly 10% of all land designated within National Scenic Areas. They are, therefore, responsible for managing a range of nationally and internationally important land within their property portfolio. Some sites also have unrivalled cultural heritage significance, such as the NTS-owned St Kilda and Iona properties.

Several sites are home to large-scale restoration projects, in areas of high biodiversity value. For example, native woodland restoration and expansion are central to the management of Abernethy Forest Reserve in the Cairngorms (RSPB), Mar Lodge near Braemar (NTS) and Dundreggan near Invermoriston (Trees for Life). Large-scale peatland restoration is also being carried out by the RSPB at their Forsinard reserve in the Flow Country in Sutherland. Glen Finglas in the Trossachs (WTS) is part of The Great Trossachs National Nature Reserve and WTS carries out forestry management on the site, aiming to create a mosaic of woodland, scattered trees and open ground over the next 200 years, restoring formerly degraded habitats across the estate. Large-


Map showing NGO owned and managed land within National Scenic Areas
Total area of National Scenic Areas owned and managed land by NGOs: 97,891 ha
Map created: 12/03/2013
Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2011
Shetland Islands inset map
Thurso
Inverness
Aberdeen
Oban
Perth
Edinburgh
Glasgow
Dumfries
Legend
NGO land within National Scenic Areas
National Scenic Areas
N
0
50
100 km

scale restoration is not just a rural activity – SWT has partnered with North Lanarkshire Council and Forestry Commission Scotland to establish the Cumbernauld Living Landscape, which aims to improve urban greenspace areas and develop a network of woodlands and wider habitats, reconnecting people to their local environment.

Local economic benefits

When discussing land reform and the various types of land ownership that exist in Scotland, the local economic benefits and impacts of different ownership models are often cited and discussed. In total, conservation organisations spend over £37 million per annum directly on the management of sites, which equates to an average spend of £181 per hectare. On average, this is just over 50% of the total annual expenditure of the organisations. It has been suggested from approximate calculations of the economic impact of sporting land management that £64 per hectare is spent on land where deer stalking and / or grouse shooting are carried out. Notably, this figure also includes money spent 'indirectly' (i.e. at local accommodation / other services) whereas the conservation organisation spend figure accounts only for direct expenditure on land management and does not also include similar indirect spends, which are likely to be considerable. For example, in the area surrounding the Dundreggan estate near Invermoriston, Trees for Life staff and their conservation volunteers spend an estimated £49,600 annually on local services and accommodation.

Scenery and wildlife tourism are important industries in Scotland, with nature-based tourism worth approximately £1.4 billion annually to the Scottish economy and supporting 39,000 full-time jobs. Arguably, conservation organisations play an important role in maintaining and enhancing this industry. As many of the sites owned by these organisations are in remote and rural locations, employment impacts of this type of ownership can be significant locally as they can account for a large part of employment in these areas. On sites owned or managed by conservation organisations, 736 full-time equivalent posts (FTEs) are directly related to the sites (around 1,300 FTEs are employed by the organisations in total). A range of permanent and part-time staff are employed, as well as seasonal staff at peak visitor / activity seasons. For example, Mar Lodge (NTS) employs 21 permanent staff and additional seasonal staff to support the ranger service, deer stalking operations and ecological monitoring activities. Similarly, Abernethy Forest Reserve (RSPB) employs over 20 people and supports a range of local employment as well. On Ben Nevis, JMT funds two dedicated Nevis Conservation Officers, along with financial support from the Nevis Partnership. These staff are appointed to carry out ecological monitoring, develop educational materials and events, as well as carry out visitor management and path maintenance.

Improving recreational access

Land owned and / or managed by conservation organisations attracts around four million visits annually (this figure is likely to be an underestimate as counters on sites only account for people passing through key access points). Visitors include walkers, nature watchers and other sightseers. For example, the NTS Glencoe visitor centre receives about 120-150 thousand visitors annually and 30,000 people visit the Loch Garten Osprey Centre each year. All of the organisations employ rangers and / or site managers (sometimes working across multiple sites) and staff and volunteers work to manage and improve public access and interpretation.

Upland footpath management is a costly affair: each metre of constructed mountain footpath can range from £100 to £200 (for a steep, stone-pitched path). NTS maintains 82 high level routes on seven of their mountain properties and established a Mountain Heritage Programme in 2003 which led to £1.9 million being spent on upland footpath repairs between 2003 and 2009. Their more recent 'Mountains for People' programme invested a total of £1.25 million. JMT raised over £800,000 to fund major realignment and restoration work on the Schiehallion summit path between 1999 and 2003 and JMT volunteers carry out annual maintenance on the path network on

Glen Nevis work party – new drainage ditch and cross drain (Sandy Maxwell)

all of their sites. Similarly, SWT staff and volunteers construct or maintain over 100km of footpaths annually and RSPB staff and volunteers maintain over 100km of access tracks and waymarked walks at their Abernethy Reserve alone.

A network of volunteers

Tasks carried out by volunteers include conservation, visitor centre interpretation, wildlife protection (e.g. Operation Peregrine at the Falls of Clyde), litter picking, footpath maintenance and ecological monitoring. In 2011-2012, nearly 5,000 people volunteered on sites owned or managed by conservation organisations. This equates to an average of 12 volunteers per site and a total of just under 300,000 volunteer hours. Based on a wage that is estimated to be close to the actual cost equivalent based on normal staffing costs for such activities, this equates to £2.9 million in equivalent staffing costs. In 2011, 153 volunteers worked in co-ordinated conservation work parties for the JMT, contributing 5,600 hours of work across all of the JMT properties. In that year, volunteers cleared 654 bags of rubbish from beaches and inshore lochs.

Working with local people and others

Engaging communities in land use decision-making is another central component of the land reform debate. It is also an important aim of the Scottish Government's Land Use Strategy, which has been revised this year. As such, conservation organisations are increasingly aware of the importance of working with others to deliver their aims. The majority of conservation organisations employ community engagement officers and/or rangers, and some have established local and regional working groups. For example, WTS employs 'Woodland Learning and Engagement Officers' and SWT has over 20 local member groups (although it is important to note that these groups tend to consist of people who are already members of the organisation, not the wider community). Similarly, NTS has four regional groups (of 8-15 members each) to represent local interests in heritage management and act as ambassadors. Education is also an important engagement activity, with a range of visitor centres, online resources and awards designed for children and adults to learn about the local area, wildlife, natural habitats and ecosystems.

Site management plans are normally available to the public on the organisations' websites and the development of plans tends to incorporate direct community involvement through local meetings and consultation. Working in partnership is very common, with the JMT sitting on the Nevis Landscape Partnership on equal footing with two community councils, representation from Rio Tinto Alcan, a local residents' group, the local authority and Scottish Natural Heritage. RSPB-led Futurescapes initiatives are also UK-wide, with a core aim to build partnerships between the RSPB

and other environmental groups, local communities, the private sector and state bodies to develop shared visions for the countryside. Five Futurescapes sites can be found in Scotland: Inner Forth, Machair, Loch Leven, Caledonian Forest and the Flow Country.

Looking forwards

Land owned and managed by conservation organisations includes some of Scotland's very finest land in terms of scenic, natural and cultural values. They therefore have a considerable opportunity to demonstrate good practice in order to understand the benefits of a well-stewarded landscape. Some questions remain about the extent to which ownership by conservation organisations can have a long-term, financially independent future in a difficult economic climate – a challenge also experienced by other types of landowners. Nonetheless, the level of investment and commitment to management of the sites appears to be very high. Whether conservation organisations should continue to buy land is also an open question – perhaps they should instead now focus their efforts on exerting more influence on other landowners to encourage conservation-focused practices through partnerships, demonstration sites and the provision of advice. There is also potential for them to act as 'first aid organisations' – as opposed to long-term landowners – that move their resources around for maximum impact. For now, though, conservation ownership is well-established as a significant and influential part of the picture of landownership in Scotland.

Jayne Glass is a Researcher at the Centre for Mountain Studies, Perth College, University of the Highlands and Islands, and Honorary Lecturer at the University of Edinburgh. Rob McMorran is a Lecturer and Rural Researcher at Scotland's Rural College (SRUC). *The information included in this article is taken from 'Evidence for Scotland's Land Reform Policy Review (2012-2014) – The socio-economic benefits of the ownership and management of land by environmental non-governmental organisations'*, commissioned report prepared by the Centre for Mountain Studies and funded by John Muir Trust, National Trust for Scotland, RSPB Scotland, Scottish Environment LINK, Scottish Wildlife Trust and Woodland Trust Scotland.*

** A copy of the full report can be downloaded on the Centre for Mountain Studies website: https://www.perth.uhi.ac.uk/subject-areas/centre-for-mountain-studies/documents/ngo-land-report*

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